

# Rural Tourism Marketing

## Chapter Eight – Special Events

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It all began when Rudy Melone, president of Gavilan College in Gilroy, read an article in 1978 about a garlic festival in Arleux, France. This little community claimed to be the Garlic Capital of the World because their event drew nearly 80,000 people over a three-day period to sample their garlic soup.

Dr. Melone believed that Gilroy was the Garlic Capital and decided to prove it. He hosted a luncheon for community leaders, fed them the best garlic dishes imaginable, and out of that luncheon came the idea for the Gilroy Garlic Festival™.

The Gilroy Garlic Festival Association was incorporated in early 1979, and the first year's festival was held. Melone remembers the quiet on the first morning of the festival – the stillness, little traffic and a light fog. “We wondered if anyone would come to our party.” He shouldn't have worried. Five thousand people were expected and 15,000 people showed up! Tickets were recycled as fast as they were turned in.



Now, more than 20 years and two million attendees later, the Garlic Festival has been regarded by the national media as “the preeminent food festival in America.”

In 1999, more than 4,000 volunteers from 148 non-profit groups worked to host the three-day festival on the last weekend in July. Nearly \$250,000 was distributed to their organizations, making this truly a community, as well as a tourism success.

### **Special Events Can Be Great Exposure**

The Gilroy Garlic Festival generated not only publicity for the agricultural community, but worldwide press for an otherwise little-known farm town. Although the effect of the festival on year-around tourism in Gilroy can be debated, it certainly fills the town during an otherwise slow July weekend.

Special events and festivals can serve as a source of great community pride, an income generator for other projects or organizations, a way to expose an obvious or hidden community asset, and of course, a reason for tourists to visit. Special events can provide a reason for a first-time visitor to come to your community, or they can provide a new attraction to a familiar destination.

They are often the first opportunity for the tourism industry and the local non-profit organizations to work together. They can provide a powerful political support base for your tourism promotion organization.

Not all communities are blessed with natural or man-made resources for attracting visitors. But as you can see from Gilroy's example, with some creativity, dedication and hard work a community can develop an attraction in the form of a special event. And as with Gilroy and Pismo Beach, special events are best when they focus on the unique attributes of the community in which they are held.

### **Best clam chowder contest Goes awry! Results...Fantastic!**

Every year, Pismo Beach holds a contest to see what restaurant makes the very best clam chowder. The contest draws entries from around the area and is hotly contested; as bragging rights for the best chowder in the "Clam Capital of the World" are worth fighting for!

Each chef dosely guards his mixture of "secret ingredients" to make sure no one finds out how he makes his brew. There is a tremendous amount of pride at stake as the judges taste each chowder one-by-one. After a period of suspenseful deliberation, their decision is announced. Egos are on the line.

Imagine the consternation when several years ago the winning restaurant was announced as ... "Denny's!"

Yes, the national chain best known for hot coffee and 24 hour service (but not necessarily gourmet dining) had beaten them all! Hot-tempered chefs and restaurant owners had a fit and claimed such an insult would ruin the competition forever, and the local press had a field day.

But what came next for the Pismo Beach Chamber of Commerce was a publicity bonanza. Newspapers from the Los Angeles Times to the San Francisco Chronicle reported the results in one form or another, and the name of Pismo Beach and its Clam Festival was spread far and wide.

The final bonus came from Denny's itself, as the restaurant chain was so pleased to have won that on every menu, in every Denny's across North America, they proudly proclaimed their clam chowder to be "Winner of the World Famous Pismo Beach Clam Chowder Competition".

How's that for publicity?



Collaborative efforts with non-profit groups can benefit all concerned, as they have what you need...manpower and community support. And you have what they need...the ability to market to both local and distant customers.



A special event can last an afternoon, a weekend or even longer. The idea can be “imported” from another community, but it will have more significance and be considerably easier to market if indigenous to your community – it’s human, environmental, agricultural or historical resources.